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Earth, Wind and a Banana

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To seize the Earth (*geo*) with its forms and phenomena through a description or writing (*graphein*) that permits one to orient and situate oneself spatio-temporally within an ever transforming planetary movement is at the heart of the geographic sciences. It is not my aim, however, to discuss geography as a synoptic undertaking with its overlap of the physical sciences and the human sciences but rather to investigate how three artists, Jean-Pierre Aubé, Steve Heimbecker and César Saëz, deploy distinct geographic approaches in their practice. Approaches that gaze through the lenses of art to reflect upon the contemporary configuration of our errant celestial body and what role we may play upon it. The three artists will be evaluated under the sign of travel, of a constant transformation not fixed in a set path, and this with the aim of gaining some sense of orientation from their respective vantage points that may indicate alternative trajectories to our current anthropologically overdetermined global course.

The contemporary state of the planet is one that is characterized by what McKenzie Wark has termed a 'virtual geography' made up of a vast array of globe-spanning information flows that supersede any sense of fixed territory and which has led to the emergence of a 'third nature.'¹ First nature comprised the natural world in its raw state, and second nature that of humankind's gradual 'civilizational taming' of nature to stake out a territory that has culminated in the reification of culture as 'our' environment; while third nature is born of a new relationship to the Earth marked on the one hand by a blurring of inherited territorial boundaries and the instauration of a globalized reign of ubiquitous connectivity and propinquity, and on the other by the conflation of first nature and cultural second nature into a mutually impacting entity, the most prominent features of which are climate change and ecological crisis. Third nature thus envelops both second nature (accumulated human impacts) and first nature (as both an impacted and active/reacting system) and this has given rise to a geography in which cultural and physical geography can no longer be clearly dissociated as was the case in classical studies in the field. It is within this turbulent planetary configuration that the artists respectively set out to find their bearings.

For his journey, Jean-Pierre Aubé wandered forth with a device known as very low frequency or V.L.F. radio apparatus (hence the title of the project *V.L.F.*, 2000) to track electromagnetic waves generated by the Earth's magnetosphere. Steve Heimbecker's approach is based on a rigorous mapping process that allows him to extrapolate data from physically and naturally manifest phenomena such as wind which he then transposes technologically to craft original multimedia work. In a different vein, César Saëz points his compass towards geographical regions that have more to do with geopolitical territories and the search for as-of-yet uncolonized spaces for art. With his never fully completed *Geostationary Banana Over Texas—GBOT* (2006 – 2008) project the artist launched a far-reaching allegorical critique of our globalized geography.

Wave Paths Far and Near

Jean-Pierre Aubé's approach can be likened to a romantic explorer-scientist who sets out into an unmapped wilderness to capture phenomenon that escape the attention of ordinary urban or rural dwellers. This is the impulse behind the *V.L.F.* (2000) project, the objective of which is to render the electromagnetic activity generated by the Earth's magnetosphere—and in particular northern lights—perceptible through the use of V.L.F. radio (a.k.a. natural radio). This quest has led Aubé to travel to remote boreal areas for two geographic reasons: one being that natural electromagnetic waves are mainly present around the polar regions, and the other that the increasing third nature emission of electromagnetic waves (carried by electrical power lines, submarines, and other signaling

devices) have made it very difficult to capture these phenomena. Though Aubé's art can be analyzed in terms of a contemporary form of landscape art, as André-Louis Paré has cogently argued,² such an appreciation needs to be contextualized in regards to both the genre's art historical categorization, and the particular geographical context in which Aubé undertakes his wave captures. Firstly, in regards to the landscape genre Aubé is in affinity with the romantic conception of nature in its sublime form, i.e. in the Kantian understanding that the forces of raw nature (for instance earthquakes, hurricanes, polar deserts) are something beyond our imaginative grasp and as such inspire a mixture of awe and terror. The highly energized electromagnetic waves, which pass right through the inner core of the planet and via the polar caps to the borderline between space and the Earth's atmosphere, are clearly of this order. Whereas the classical landscape genre provides a window on the natural world that references human mastery over it through single point perspective and other framing devices, the natural force that Aubé translates cannot and will not be fixed in such a manner. It is at this level that one must also situate the fact that Aubé makes use of techno-scientific methodologies to make manifest not so much a landscape, within its inherent sense of fixity and limits of visibility, but a phenomenon of constant flux that cannot be neatly territorialized or encompassed by our perceptual or conceptual apparatus. His project is thus not so much about inhabiting a world as it is about 'riding the waves' about traveling along the planetary itinerary of constant flux; and this is best seized in a time-based media such as sound. And it is principally sound (though the project also contains video and photographic material) that Aubé brings back into the gallery space where he offers it not as scientific data, but as the basis of an aesthetic experience mediated by technology. From a scientific point of view this same material could be put forth as data to be interpreted objectively, i.e. separated from direct experience. However, presented as art the sound waves sweep the spectator in a sensing of a sublime phenomenon that inscribe him/her in a planetary wandering which bursts the frames of landscape representation.

In the *V.L.F.* follow-up and sister project *Save the Waves* (2004) Aubé shifts the focal point by indicating how the intermeshing of first nature and second nature transpose one into an irremediable third nature geography. In this project, the artist set up an elaborate speaker system to diffuse V.L.F. captured sound of ambient electromagnetic waves produced mainly by the electrical power grid. The artist thus draws attention not only to this habitually inaudible sonic drone, but also to the fact that these waves are interfering with telluric electromagnetism. Hence the tongue-in-cheek eco-activist title which references the fact that the sheer scale and spread of technologically generated electromagnetism has a planetary impact. In aesthetically highlighting this Aubé makes one cognizant of how deeply human activity is now embedded with that of raw nature. The great value of Aubé's artistic interventions is to awaken our senses to this shift in itinerary and the necessity to pay heed to the Earth's loud and low whispers that now involve all of us before awe and terror inspiring matters the extent of which we have barely begun to grasp.

Moving the Wind

Artist Steve Heimbecker homes in on more defined geographical territories with a particular attention given to the phenomenon of wind and its effects on structuring sound spaces.³ Unlike Aubé's 'deterritorializing' explorations, Heimbecker proceeds in a more classical manner characterized by rationality, symmetry and proportion. His initial step is to apply a rigorous cartography upon a physical territory that he then reworks artistically to capture phenomena occurring within it. For instance for the *Wind Array*

Cascade Machine—WACM (2003) project Heimbecker took his inspiration from the movement of wind across the vast grain fields in his native Saskatchewan, and how this wind produces sound without itself being audible. Based on this metaphorical intuition he devised the WACM by applying the standard survey grid network of dividing a 640-acre square into 64 sections each measuring 8 x 8 miles. This second-nature territorialization of a geographical area was transposed by Heimbecker as a blueprint for the WACM. The system—first set up on top of the Méduse rooftop in Quebec City—consists of “an array of 64 motion sensors controlled by individual pic micro controllers, designed to work collectively from a grid of 8 units.”⁴ The WACM’s function is to capture the motion of the wind as it sweeps across the grid, and in this sense it acts as an analogue of wind moving through a field of grain. The data collected by the joint movement of the sensors is “a multi-channel serial data stream that can be recorded...or streamed over WWW in real time.”⁵ As such the wind data constitutes an abstracted diagram of an actual physical phenomenon (the wind blowing across the sensors) which can be transposed as a console or information controller for any multimedia input; for instance for sound input the silent wind diffuses sound data by affecting various diffusion parameters such as the dynamic sound pressure range at the speaker output. The influence of the wind as an information carrier and controller has been applied to both visual installation such as *POD* (2003)—in which LED equipped rods or ‘Pods’ light up in direct correlation to the amplitude captured by the WACM (in real-time or recorded form), or for the *Turbulent Sound Matrix* (2008) which used the WACM data to diffuse a musical composition on a 64-channel surround speaker matrix. In regards to the art and geography conjuncture, Heimbecker’s work is interesting in that it takes a primal phenomenon (the first

nature wind) in order to apply as second nature territorialization (cartography) and then unleashes the extrapolated wind data to diffuse sound or images in third-nature virtual geographies such as the Internet. In this process the originary phenomenon is never actually lost or denatured, even if it is moved/delocalized and amplified through techno-artistic intervention it nevertheless continues to carry the force and dynamism of the wind and its sound producing impact. This aesthetic rendering reveals that technology can amplify and enhance our sensory experience of natural phenomenon and their geographical location, while also calling attention to what extent it can harness both first and second-nature elements into a resolutely third-nature in which localized physical phenomenon can be uplifted and circulated within the infinitely malleable territories of virtual geographies.

Bananas and Geopolitics

Whereas Aubé and Heimbecker work with what are initially first-nature phenomenon and rework them through second-nature technologies in relation to our contemporary third nature geographical contexts, César Saëz is more concerned with questioning the shifting geopolitical boundaries of our globalized world and exploring free spaces for art’s expressive potentialities. The title of the project *Geostationary Banana over Texas* —GBOT (2006-2008) in and of itself encapsulates its spatial position, its geographical target and geopolitical innuendos, as well its humorous inflections. Saëz’s artistic venture exhibits marked baroque traits: an extravagant display, a preference for curves and folds, and the use of an allegorical mode. Despite the fact that the project was never carried to full fruition (due to a funding shortage in 2008) through its conceptual audacity, the various research stages, website and live presentations, development tests, and the planetary discussion it triggered in the traditional media





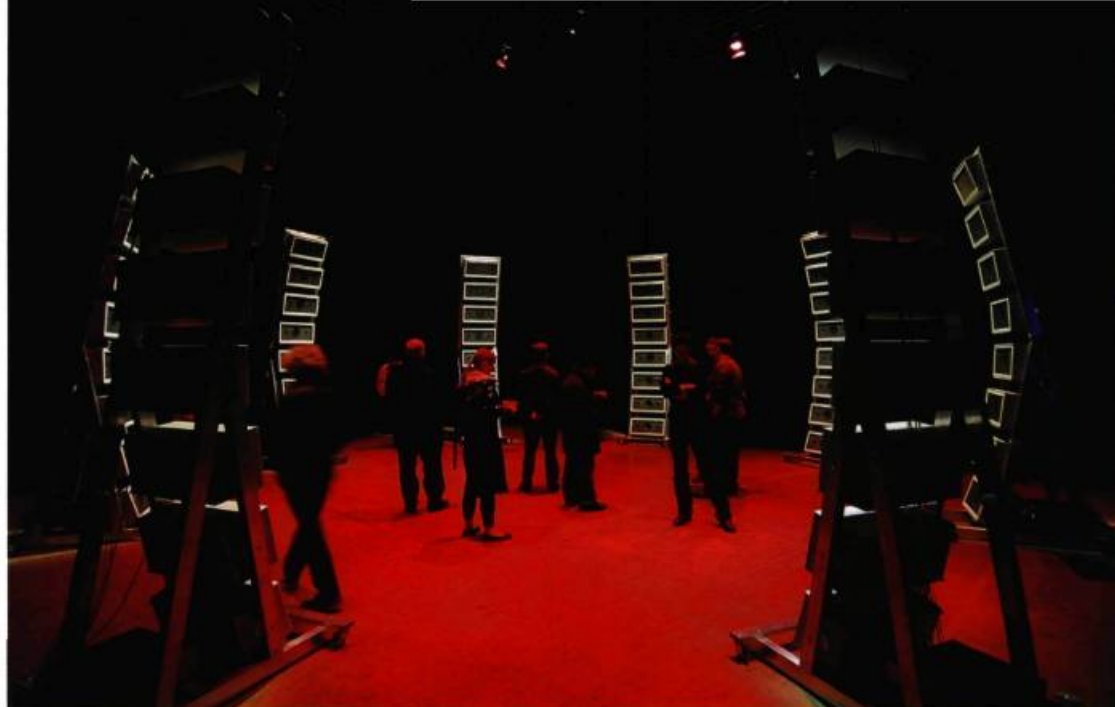
and on the internet the GBOT concept and process merits to be considered as a successful artistic gesture in its own right.

The drive behind the GBOT was to launch an allegorically potent object—a 300-meter, banana-shaped helium filled blimp made out of balsa wood and bamboo—into the stratosphere over Texas for a period of about a month. It is an enticing artistic proposition that speaks with eloquent humour to dead serious issues such as advertisement, spectacle and the geopolitics of visibility.⁶ Though his project involves various techno-scientific measurements of wind patterns, features of the stratosphere and so forth, its concern is not with natural phenomenon as such, but more immediately with the current third-nature configuration of global geographies and the potential role that art may have in redrawing its contours. It is from this point of view of a harmless, but by no means innocent, artistic geographical intervention that one must consider the implications of the GBOT project.

For Saëz space is a “canvas for expression” and a means to explore “territory as sovereign within the social context of today’s global society.”⁷ The project thus has everything to do with the search for free spaces that are not bound to the constraints of global planetary planning and control. A signature feature of Saëz’s art practice has been to artistically intervene in spaces outside of officially-sanctioned art institutions and thereby to critique them and the system they uphold.⁸ In this sense, the GBOT is a consequent development that takes this logic to the sky by drawing the issue of visibility/invisibility large and bold over a geographical area that is highly symbolic of much that is awry with current a current global planning premised on maximized profit, war mongering and ubiquitous control. Now, launching a 300-meter banana-like airship furtively (to use the artist’s expression) from Mexico into Texas does entail some forethought regarding the kind of reaction this airborne fruit-object may elicit in the official overseers of the lone star territory. To counter any possible resistance Saëz hired a legal team that determined that there are actually no international laws governing the occupation of the stratosphere, and hence this space is free for the taking. The next question is, why a banana? In regards to his choice of fruit iconography, Saëz is clearly in the realm of allegory in which as Benjamin states “any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else.”⁹ Saëz refuses to ascribe any direct symbolic meaning to the object and instead offers a multiplicity of possible interpretations ranging from: “Useless and absurd. —that is what it is.... The Banana is a Joke to Stupidity... A Symbol utilizing symbolisms ... The banana is ‘pop’ (and a foreigner)... It is a common thing, and yet, it

comes from far away... because bananas do not grow in Texas.”¹⁰ It is precisely this open-ended spectrum of allegorical readings in combination with the equally allegorized Texas that enables Saëz to yoke the sublime and ridiculous inherent in the GBOT, which is both meaningfully humorous and absurdly dead serious. The GBOT is meaningful in its visionary envisioning of near-space altitudes as a space for expression not bound to the constraints of spectacle and the laws of value, sublime in its ambition to make a work of art visible in the heavens that can potentially be seen by millions of people; ridiculous in the sense that a banana is a fruit that by way of its shape and form inherently solicits laughter; absurd because bananas don’t fly, nor do they come in such large sizes. Of course the banana is also a derogatory symbol of Latin America that points to pressing inequalities and consequent economic migrations which are clearly tied into Texan and North American geopolitical realities. In his attempt to inscribe the GBOT into the Earth’s errant movement over a specific geographic area, Saëz highlights art’s capacity to imaginatively signal geopolitical situations. On this last point it must be noted that GBOT was indeed a success, and this despite the fact that it was never launched. Beginning with its website the proposed GBOT incursion led to a worldwide discussion in the traditional media and on the internet that though mostly positive also raised some controversy. As such the project traveled through the networks of our virtual geography, and judging by the magnitude of the reactions ignited the imagination of many and went some way to opening a path in which such visionary near-space art will eventually become fully realizable.

Jean-Pierre Aubé, Steve Heimbecker and César Saëz, each in their own way are travelers who in the course of their journeys deploy artistic means that reassess and re-invent ways whereby to perceive and inscribe oneself differently upon the errant star we call Earth. With his focus on the vast electromagnetic waves, both in their primal telluric and in their technologically generated manifestation Aubé brings these phenomena to our perceptual attention and questions the drowning out of planetary/cosmic waves through the increasing spread of electrical and communication networks. For his part, Heimbecker invents cartographies whereby to harness the dynamic potential of primal phenomena and to channel them into techno-artistic works that create novel perceptual experiences in which the connection to the originary source material and location, though technologically amplified and refashioned, are never entirely lost. Through his proposed launch of a giant-banana into the planetary stratosphere César



Steve Heimbecker, *Turbulence Sound Matrix Elektra*, May 8, 2008. TSM installation in Elektra theatre with audience. Photo: Camil Scortecanu, Conception Lévy – Elektra, Montreal.

Saëz has us looking upwards at the heavens to recognize the potential of reinvention and downwards to take stock of the absurdity and cruelty of our current geopolitical predicament. These various geo-artistic vantage points do not so much redraw our existing maps, as they invite us to invent and imagine new maps to guide us on an uncharted planetary itinerary more promising than the one-way flight path that the current era of globalized planning with its destructive depletion of the Earth's vital energies has us locked us into.

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Bernard Schütze is a media theorist, art critic and translator. He has contributed presentation and catalogue texts for galleries and art events, among them Galerie B-312, Berlinische Galerie (Berlin, Germany), Le Centre Clark, the 11th Biennale of visual arts (Pančevo, Serbia), Observatori (Valence, Spain), SKOL and VOX centre de l'image contemporaine. His essays and reviews have been published in journals such as *C-Magazine*, *Espace Sculpture*, *Parachute* and *Spirale*. As a translator he has, among other things, translated works by Jean Baudrillard, Félix Guattari, and Heiner Müller into English. He lives and works in Montreal.

Steve Heimbecker, *Turbulence Sound Matrix Elektra*, April 8, 2008. TSM complete, final testing of the composition "Signe", afternoon light, east view in the artist's Montreal studio. Photo: Steve Heimbecker.



NOTES

- 1 McKenzie Wark, *Virtual Geography: Living With Global Media Events*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1994.
- 2 André-Louis Paré, "Espaces, paysages, frontières," *Parachute*, Montréal, no.120, oct./nov./déc. 2005, pp. 93-113.
- 3 Rather than focusing on Heimbecker's lengthy involvement with place and acoustic mapping in general we limit our focus here to his *Wind Array Cascade Machine-WACM*. For more on his geographically inspired approach see: Steve Heimbecker, *Songs of Place*, DVD 5.1 box set and book (with texts by Vincent Bonin, Anna Friz, Steve Heimbecker, Christof Migonne, F. Scott Taylor, and Barry Truax), co-published by the artist and OBORO, Montréal, 2005.
- 4 Heimbecker quoted at: www3.sympatico.ca/qubeossm/WACM.html.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 In an interview with the *Globe and Mail*, Saëz stated that with the GBOT "We address advertisement, we address entertainment, we address political issues...> "Why not a banana over Texas," *Globe and Mail*, September 7, 2007.
- 7 César Saëz quoted in the editorial "That's Bananas" at: <http://rhizome.org/editorial/fp/blog.php/531>.
- 8 For more on Saëz's practice see: www.Césarsaez.com/English/CÉSAR_SAEZ.html.
- 9 Walter Benjamin, *The Origins of German Tragic Drama*, Verso, New York 1998, p.175.
- 10 Saëz quoted on the GBOT website at: www.geostationarybananaovertexas.com/en.html.